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## Discussing Poverty with Student Teachers: the Realities of Dialogue

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This paper, which is based on my own practice as a teacher educator at a university in the North-East of England, focuses on the effectiveness of dialogue as a tool for teaching the topic of socio-economic disadvantage in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). The research was triggered by questions which had emerged within my work, about the compatibility of the liberal procedures of dialogic enquiry on the one hand, with the aims of critical teacher education on the other. Using critical realism as a theoretical framework, this article explores these tensions in a case study which follows dialogic enquiries across four consecutively taught groups of student teachers. Results indicate that dialogic enquiry *can* be used as a powerful tool in social justice teaching in ITE, but that critical teacher educators have a duty to support students in identifying false (Sayer 2000) understandings and the workings of inequality. Neutrality on the part of the teacher educator and notions of equal validity of the students' responses were thus found to be of secondary importance to the aims of social justice education. More widely, this article argues that critical realism can shed light on our understanding of the teaching of contentious and politically sensitive issues.

**Keywords:** dialogic enquiry, poverty, social justice, Initial Teacher Education, critical realism

## **Introduction**

Much has been written in this JET Special Edition about the need to educate student teachers in relation to socio-economic disadvantage. According to Wegerif (2010), dialogic enquiry can be a powerful tool for criticality and transformation; hence dialogic enquiry has the potential to be an important and innovative approach in the teaching of social justice in ITE. However, this potential has hitherto been under-researched. This study, which is based on my own practice, focuses on the effectiveness of dialogic enquiry in the education of student teachers on the topic of poverty. Alongside likely benefits, there are also potential tensions between the liberal procedures of dialogic enquiry on the one hand (Gregory 2014), and the aims of critical teacher education on the other (Apple 2013). This article explores such issues within dialogic enquiry as: variation in participant opinion; the risk that harmful prejudices are exacerbated (Gorski 2012); reciprocity; the stance and role of the critical teacher educator; and, the extent to which dialogic enquiry is purposeful (Alexander 2006). Critical realism is used as the theoretical framework for this reflexive, iterative case study, and its value in this context is, implicitly, also investigated. In the background section of this article the themes of social justice teacher education and dialogue are introduced and three aims of ITE in relation to poverty are proposed. This is followed by the methodology section, in which the aims of the research, the critical realist perspective, the context and the methods are presented. The findings section is structured according to four themes and followed by a discussion, before the conclusions and recommendations of this research are presented.

## Background

### *Social justice and Initial Teacher Education in England*

Student teachers in England become educators in a deeply unequal society (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010; Hughes 2012), but the terms *social justice*, *equality* and *equity* are absent from the English Teachers' Standards (Department for Education 2011). This is in contrast to, for example, the Standards for Registration in Scotland, where *Social Justice* is the first point mentioned as part of the Professional Values and Personal Commitment (General Teaching Council for Scotland 2013). Although student teachers in England are not required to engage with social justice issues such as poverty in order to gain Qualified Teacher Status – or perhaps because of this (Apple 2013) – a discussion of poverty should, arguably, be an important element of ITE programmes in England, for three reasons which are presented below. The ensuing three aims inform my practice as a critical teacher educator, and are referred to in later sections of this article as aims of critical teacher education.

First, according to the government's Department for Work and Pensions (2015, 4), 19% of children in the UK were living in 'absolute low income' families in 2013-14, and this percentage is expected to stay at least constant for some time (Brewer et al. 2011; Browne et al. 2014). It is thus highly likely that student teachers will teach many children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds during their career. Because for many of these student teachers there can be a discrepancy between their pupils' disadvantaged backgrounds and their own (often) more privileged backgrounds, it is important to raise student teachers' awareness of the needs many families face (Wrigley 2012). Aim 1 can thus be formulated as 'to increase understanding of the difficulties faced by pupils living in poverty whilst avoiding

the use of deficit discourses in portraying underprivileged families' (Rogalsky 2009; Wrigley 2012; Grainger 2012).

The second reason relates to the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on pupils' educational outcomes. Income is the single most significant determining factor of educational achievement in the UK, and the devastating impact of poverty has been well-documented (Reay 2006; Hatcher 2012; Cooper & Stewart 2013, Smyth & Wrigley 2013). Student teachers need, therefore, to understand the reasons for this 'attainment gap' between pupils from less and more affluent backgrounds. They need to know how schools and teachers can aim for equity through maximising learning opportunities for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. They also need to know how much harm can be done by teachers' prejudices, labelling practices and lowered expectations (Gorski 2012), and to become aware of their own views (Cochran-Smith 2003). We can thus formulate Aim 2 as 'to develop student teachers' knowledge of the reasons for any educational underachievement of disadvantaged pupils and the ways in which teachers can either minimise or exacerbate this'.

However, they also need to develop an understanding that education alone cannot be expected to solve structural problems such as poverty and systemic inequality. So, finally, if one subscribes to Apple's view (2011, 229) that education is a political act, student teachers should also be engaged in critical analysis of the structural inequalities which exist and the mechanisms which sustain it. This includes the development of an awareness of the deeply harmful effects of deficit discourses towards disadvantaged people which are prevalent in some sectors of British society, including in large sections of the media (Rogalsky 2009; Hatcher 2012; Jones 2012) – in other words, to 'construct and deconstruct issues of poverty' (Cochran-Smith 2003). Aim 3 can thus be formulated as 'to develop an understanding of the structural nature of poverty and the limited powers of education to compensate for it'.

These three arguments, and ensuing aims, are complementary. A deeper understanding of the structural mechanisms of inequality, for example, can help to avoid a sense of alienation which some student teachers might experience on placement in schools with high numbers of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Within the socio-political context in England it should also be pointed out that this study was carried out against a backdrop in which, following government policy, ITE provision led by Higher Education providers is being severely threatened. As a result, student teachers may have minimal input from Higher Education providers, which risks side-lining deeper social understandings in ITE in favour of a greater emphasis on the pragmatics of classroom practice. The implications of this in relation to dialogue and social justice will be explored in the discussion section of this paper.

### *Dialogue*

The value of dialogue in democratic and progressive education has long been recognised (Burbules 1993; Hess 2004; Alexander 2006; Dewey [1916] 1966; Freire [1970] 2000). Hess argues that discussions of controversial issues in education can develop democratic thinking (2004, 257), and Wegerif (2010) has explained how transformation can take place within the ‘dialogic space’. Dialogue could thus be assumed to have the potential to be a transformative tool in the teaching of social justice in ITE.

Burbules (1993, 7) describes dialogue as being marked by a climate of open participation and a spirit of discovery. He goes on to say that it involves, amongst other things, an attitude of reciprocity and respect, even though disagreements may arise. Alexander (2006, 28) also mentions reciprocity, in the sense that ideas are shared by teachers and students on a reciprocal basis. Alongside this, Alexander (ibid.) specifies that dialogue is collective

(referring to the collaborative nature of dialogue), supportive (referring to the absence of anxiety), cumulative (referring to ideas being linked and constructed), and purposeful (referring to dialogue fulfilling its educational aims). The concepts of reciprocity (Burbules 1993) and purpose (Alexander 2006) provide two of the main themes explored in this study.

In relation to dialogic education on controversial topics such as poverty, Warnick and Smith (2014) propose four types of dialogic directive teaching: explicit directive teaching, steering, soft-directive teaching, and school-ethos endorsement. Gregory (2014, 636), rejects these in favour of what he calls the ‘procedurally directive approach’, present in such dialogic enquiry methods as Philosophy for Children (Haynes 2002; Lipman 2003; Chandley & Sutcliffe 2010, 2014). In this method educators do not take a stance, but use ‘epistemic authority’ (Gregory 2014, 637) to regulate the procedures of the enquiry in order to help participants make reasonable inferences and avoid fallacies in the enquiry (ibid.). A form of dialogue which is related to the Philosophy for Children approach, named the Community of Enquiry (Baumfield & Mroz 2002; Jones-Teuben 2013), features specifically in this study. In this form of dialogic enquiry participants generate and choose a question as the focus for the enquiry, in which the educator’s stance is that of a neutral facilitator (Gregory 2014).

Dialogic enquiry is not without its critics. Despite its claims to reciprocity, collectivity and support, Burbules (2000, 2001) and Lefstein (2006) have argued that, on the basis of competition and power which are frequently occurring elements (Lefstein 2006, 6), dialogue can be experienced as discriminatory by participants, and, in fact, restrict self-expression and communication (Burbules 2000, 1). Chetty (2008) has made this point with specific reference to the use of the Community of Enquiry. Efforts were therefore made to identify incidents of marginalisation within the study.

## Methodology

It must be pointed out that I am both the researcher in this study and – as the teacher educator – one of its subjects; my standpoints in both roles will be presented later in this section. To maximise clarity the first person is used primarily in relation to my role as practicing teacher educator.

### *Aim and research questions*

The aim of this study was to investigate the suitability of the liberal (rather than critical) practice of the Community of Enquiry, with its focus on a question chosen by the participants, its supposed facilitator neutrality and its inter-student reciprocity, for the critical teaching of social justice. The study explored the following questions:

- To what extent might this liberal practice risk creating an environment in which negative stereotypes of people living in poverty could be expressed and exacerbated (Gorski 2012), rather than disrupted?
- Was it appropriate for me as facilitator to take a neutral stance? And if not, would this lower the degree of *supportiveness* (Burbules 2000; Alexander 2006; Chetty 2008)?
- What was the potential for student teachers to discuss any contentious views in dialogue or *reciprocity*, given the power differentials between them and myself as the teacher educator (Burbules 2000; Alexander 2006)?
- Is dialogic enquiry an efficient use of the very limited amount of time available on this ITE course: in other words, is dialogue *purposeful* (Alexander *ibid.*) enough?



## ***Critical realism***

Critical realism provides the theoretical framework for this study. This is particularly relevant in relation to teaching about poverty as, in contrast to ‘strong’ social constructionism, it acknowledges that a world exists which is independent of people’s perceptions and constructions, whilst going beyond the descriptive analysis which positivism provides (Sayer 2000, 90; O’Mahoney & Vincent 2014). Critical realists ‘seek to identify what exists’ (Sayer, 12) and aim to uncover the mechanisms and connections between phenomena in order to provide explanations.

Reality in this perspective is stratified into three elements: the real, the actual and the empirical (Bhaskar 1975, in Sayer, 11). The *real*, according to Sayer (ibid.), is what exists, either natural or social, and independently of whether we have knowledge of it. The *real* contains objects, but also their structures, power and potential. The *actual* refers to what happens when those powers are activated, whereas the *empirical* is the domain of observable experience. Thus, in relation to poverty, we can say that at the *empirical* level 19% of children in the UK live in absolute low income families, in the *actual* domain we could consider the experiences of these children, whereas when we consider the *real* we know that there are social, economic and political mechanisms at work which cause poverty, and the potential structural impact of poverty.

This ontological stratification can also be used as a methodology to discuss the concept of dialogue in this study. At the *empirical* level we can analyse the data gathered; and at the *actual* level we have to acknowledge that much of what is experienced and thought during dialogues exists, but is not expressed or recorded. In the domain of the *real*, we can discuss what educational, psychological, social and philosophical drivers appear to have caused the

development of the dialogues held, and what the potential is of dialogue in ITE (Easton 2010, 121). Italics are used for the terms *empirical*, *actual* and *real* in this article where they are used in this specific critical realist sense (Sayer 2000).

A final argument for the use of critical realism as a framework for this study is its critical approach, not only towards other theories but also towards social practices. Based on Bhaskar's view on the emancipatory potential of social science (1986, in Sayer 2000, 18), this is the identification of shared meanings which are 'false':

If social scientific accounts differ from those of actors then they cannot help but be critical of lay thought and action. Furthermore, as Bhaskar argues, to identify understandings in society as false, and hence actions informed by them as falsely based, is to imply that (other things being equal) those beliefs and actions ought to be changed.

(Sayer 2000, 19)

This statement has implications not just for critical realist researchers but clearly also for critical educators, as will be discussed. Critical realism is thus not only used as a tool for data analysis in this study, but, more widely, may be able to shed light on our understanding of dialogue in the teaching of contentious and politically sensitive issues.

## ***Context***

The context of this study is a ten-month long Master's level Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) ITE course for primary teachers at a university in the North-East of England, to which I contribute as a teacher educator. In particular, the study focuses on one day which I teach on the links between poverty and education. This day, titled 'Income and Outcomes: Challenging Inequality' (the content of which is described in a later section), forms part of the Reflective Practitioner module on this programme, which comprises four rotational taught days. In this module a range of critical, theoretical and social perspectives

relevant to education is explored: another one of the days, for example, is based on critical whiteness studies, as discussed by Smith (2013). With regards to the discussion of poverty, a day's teaching is, of course, extremely limited but this Reflective Practitioner module day is one of a number of elements of the course which focuses on this issue. Other elements of the course, which are specifically related to socio-economic disadvantage, include a placement task investigating schools' perspectives of the Pupil Premium (DfE 2015). This is followed up in a seminar at the university, in which I support the students to critically compare and discuss their findings. School placements also provide opportunities for students to work with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and to reflect on these experiences. The day's teaching which forms the focus of this paper is thus situated within a contextual framework of the teaching of social justice on our PGCE programme. However, time available to spend on this issue is limited, due to the many other requirements of the course. This was the reason why this study explored if the use of dialogue in this context is *purposeful* (Alexander 2006), as mentioned earlier in this section.

Other features of the course are the use of enquiry, enquiry-based learning and dialogue. Student teachers are introduced to aspects of sociocultural theory (Wells 1999), and a range of dialogic teaching methods is used throughout the programme, both by the teacher educators and the student teachers themselves whilst on placement. One of the other contributions I make to the PGCE programme is a training course in the Philosophy for Children (P4C) method (Lipman 2003; Chandley & Sutcliffe 2010). Once the student teachers are acquainted with the procedures of the Community of Enquiry, which is inherent in P4C, it is a potentially useful dialogic method which I use in other elements of the ITE course, such as the 'Income and Outcomes: Challenging Inequality' day.

## ***Methods***

This is a small-scale, qualitative, practitioner-research case study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009; Thomas 2011). It explores the development of my use, as teacher educator, of dialogue across four groups (A, B, C and D) each of 20–25 student teachers (89 students in total), on the Income and Outcomes: Challenging Inequality day. The study is iterative in the sense that it explores data from four days across four consecutive weeks, during which I made changes to the content of each day, based on my reflections of the previous days. The study is based on four data sets, the main one being of my own observations and reflections. These are socially constructed (Sayer 2000, 90) and dialogic (Bakhtin 1986; Wells 1999) in nature: shared reflections with team colleagues, who were simultaneously teaching ‘their’ Reflective Practitioner days to the other three groups (on a rotational basis), helped to focus, deepen and analyse my thoughts. A second dataset consists of audio recordings of the dialogues held, which were used to clarify specific discourse sequences during analysis. A third dataset emanates from the Reflective Diaries, in which all students were asked to identify which aspects of this day had most shaped their views. It is acknowledged that the validity of this dataset may have been impaired by the fact that the diaries were part of an assessed piece of course work. Thus, as not all students will have written down their *actual* views, the *actual* domain must be assumed to be far greater than, and not necessarily congruent to, the *empirical* domain of this dataset. A final dataset is provided by the Reflective Practitioner course evaluations of the day, in which student teachers were asked to summarise how it had developed their understanding of the issues discussed.

The data were analysed iteratively in relation to the four different groups and the changes I made to the structure and content of the day over the four weeks, and in relation to four themes which emanated from the questions outlined earlier in this section: stigmatisation,

facilitator neutrality, reciprocity, and the degree to which the enquiries were purposeful. The main dataset was mostly reflective in nature, but rigour and consistency of analysis and explanation was provided by the use of the critical realism framework. Although this is a qualitative study, a very brief quantitative analysis of the Reflective Diaries was also carried out (see findings section, Table 1).

### ***Ethical considerations and standpoints***

All students were informed of the aims and methods of this research, and all gave explicit permission for me to gather observational and audio data. All but one also gave written consent for the use of their Reflective Diary for this study. A number of ethical issues need to be acknowledged, however, and the first of these relates to my relationship with the student teachers. As one of their teacher educators, my role was not only to support their professional development, but ultimately also as a gatekeeper towards their accreditation with Qualified Teacher Status: the ensuing power differential, combined with their knowledge of my commitment to both dialogic enquiry methods and social justice may have impacted on the data. Secondly, as this was an enquiry into my own practice, it is essential that my standpoint is acknowledged (Edwards 2012). The research was driven by my commitment as a teacher educator to both dialogic enquiry and social justice, and I felt professionally compelled to resolve the questions I had posed, in order to improve my practice. Whereas this has provided my study with a large degree of authenticity (Thomas 2011), the risk of bias is not ruled out.

### ***‘Income and Outcomes: Challenging Inequality’: a brief overview of the day***

In preparation for the day, students were required to read a number of set texts (Kershner & Northen 2010; Hatcher 2012; E. Smith 2012; Wrigley 2012; Smyth & Wrigley 2013), which

were referred to and discussed during the day. There were three sessions in each day, each of which was informed by the aims outlined earlier in the Methodology section of this article. The first two sessions included, amongst a number of other activities, a dialogic enquiry. The focus of the first session was on perspectives of social justice, and inequality. As part of this session, students watched two video fragments of 'Poor Kids' (Neumann 2011), a documentary in which a number of British children from severely disadvantaged backgrounds are filmed in their homes. These film clips were discussed in both small-group and whole-group dialogue, which will be referred to in the findings section as Dialogue 1. The focus of the second session was on the links between educational achievement and poverty, and a whole-group dialogic enquiry session, referred to as Dialogue 2, was held on this topic as part of this session. The third part of the day, which focused on the potential of schools and teachers to support pupils from poorer backgrounds, did not involve any explicit whole-group dialogue, and is therefore not discussed in this study. Although this study focuses on dialogue, it must be emphasised that the day also included a range of other pedagogical methods to address the teaching content.

## **Findings**

This section presents the study findings in relation to the analytic themes mentioned earlier: stigmatisation (Smyth and Wrigley 2014); facilitator neutrality (Gregory 2012); reciprocity (Alexander 2006); and the degree to which the dialogues had been purposeful (ibid.).

### ***Stigmatisation: exacerbated or disrupted?***

After watching the film clips, the student teachers were asked to discuss their observations in small groups. In Group A, a female student in one of these groups commented on the fact that one of the families in the film clips appeared to have a dog. She argued that it was

“unjustifiable”, that people on benefits spent “her and her parents’ hard-earned tax-payers’ money” on dog food – comments similar to those which Jones (2012) refers to as demonization of the poor. When I heard and questioned these views in her small group, the student rejected my perspective, and expanded on her views several times. However, when I asked for comments in the whole group plenary, no-one from that small group mentioned the issue of the dog, which may have been the result of this student feeling marginalised by my intervention (Lefstein 2006). Aware that this might be the case, I did not raise it either, and thus (as I later saw it) missed the opportunity to disrupt these views. As a result of this reflection, I explicitly asked the following groups (B, C and D) if anyone had noticed the dog, and invited discussion of this issue. During the small group discussions in group B, a male student teacher argued that the wide-screen television which had been visible in one of the clips was, like the dog, “unjustifiable” in a family which is dependent on benefits. The phrases ‘taxpayer’s money’ (Dorling 2011) and ‘bad parenting’ (Gorski 2012, 309; Jones, 2012) were brought up. In contrast to Group A, these comments were, however, expressed in the whole group discussion, and matched by counter-arguments from other students in the group, ranging from children’s comfort via social capital and the limited options of high-interest loans to human rights, all of which led to a heated discussion with the student who had expressed these opinions. By contrast, in group C no stigmatisation of disadvantaged families came to my attention. Finally, in group D some negative views related to the dog and the television set were expressed by a number of female students in one of the small groups, expressed in the large group and repudiated in the whole group discussion.

A critical realist analysis of this theme would suggest that the *empirical* appearance of the dog and the television set had led some students to share their *actual* thoughts in the small

group. Bringing these out in the whole group allowed these comments to be disrupted and identified as ‘false’ by other students (Sayer 2000).

### ***Facilitator neutrality***

As a Community of Enquiry facilitator, I was initially prepared to challenge all views but reluctant to favour any over others (Chandley & Sutcliffe 2010). I asked questions; encouraged students to identify inferences, evidence and assumptions; and attempted to elicit counter arguments (Gregory 2012) in all discussions. However, after my experiences with Dialogue 1 in Group A, I realised that as a critical educator I had to challenge negative stereotyping of disadvantaged people in particular. Although I did not *explicitly* support some students’ opinions over others’, it can be assumed that my own views were *implicitly* known to most students (Bakhtin 1986, 166).

In Dialogue 2 a development in facilitator neutrality took place, related to the enquiry question. Group A had generated and selected ‘Is it the place of Education to solve social problems?’. This question had led to a discussion of a wide range of problems, such as obesity and alcoholism, which were not directly related to socio-economic disadvantage. As I did not feel that this was an effective enough use of the limited time, I presented an enquiry question to the following groups. In Groups B and C this question was: ‘In what ways does education perpetuate inequality?’ Although this had led to a productive discussion in Group B, in Group C the same question led to a fairly consensual dialogue based on the literature set. I therefore presented Group D with a potentially more challenging question: ‘Why does poverty exist?’. However, Dialogue 2 in Group D was possibly the least productive and cumulative (Alexander 2006, 28), as relatively few students took part and relatively few ideas were linked to each other. This was perhaps related to the fact that I had deliberately chosen a



more philosophical and political, *real*-domain related question, which may have rendered this dialogue less collective (Alexander 2006, 28) than some of the other discussions held. One student in group D mentioned the following in his reflective diary: ‘This session was fairly demoralising as debate was curtailed by the personal agenda of the session leader’ (QH, male student). In all the datasets this was the only comment which was explicitly critical of my role in the enquiries.

A critical realist analysis of this theme would suggest that whereas my views were not *empirically* apparent during dialogues 1 and 2, they may have been *actually* detected by many students. It appears that once I became less overtly neutral in my facilitation, it became easier in many discussions to discuss *real*-domain issues of poverty. However, for some dialogues such as Dialogue 2 in Group D, and for QH in that group, this may have led to a lowered degree of motivation.

### ***Reciprocity***

This theme is based on the mutual respect and sharing of ideas identified by Burbules (1993,7) and Alexander (2006, 28). The female student in Group A who had not wanted to talk about the dog in the whole group wrote this in her Reflective Diary:

Taking on board other people’s views showed me that I have very different views to them on the same subject. I believe that the video that we watched showing how children of deprived areas lived caused an awful lot of discussion that took it from the teaching of the children to a more political discussion.

(SF, female student)

The ‘awful lot of discussion’ referred to here had taken place in her small group only and in my presence, and may, as mentioned before, point to a perceived lack of reciprocity, exemplifying the sometimes ‘un-dialogic’ nature of dialogue (Burbules 2001; Lefstein 2006).

A comparison between the female student in Group A and the male student in Group B (who commented on the wide-screen TV in the whole group plenary) reveals the power of group dynamics and the role which confidence plays in driving dialogue. Gender may have been a factor here.

A conceptualisation of inequality was greatly helped by the personal account of poverty shared by one of the female participants in Enquiry 2 in Group B. Despite, or perhaps as a result of, the heated debate held in Dialogue 1, the level of *supportiveness* (Alexander 2006, 28) in the group was such that this student felt willing to share his highly personal narrative. The male student teacher who, during enquiry 1, had given his strong negative views on people living on benefits, took part much less vocally in this discussion and commented on the following aspects in his Reflective Diary:

... The session was very useful in developing my own awareness of how social factors such as poverty and the level of parental education can affect a child's development.

(HM, male student, Group B)

Although it is not certain whether this student had changed his views on 'poor parenting', or the use of benefits, his comments here express a much more considered view than those which he had expressed in Dialogue 2. A clear majority of students (12 out of 20) in this group mentioned in their Reflective Diaries that the discussions had been a positive factor in shaping their view during this day, and particularly Dialogue 1, such as CR:

The open debate allowed me to take in other people's ideas and experiences and allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of my own thoughts

(CR, female student, Group B)

A critical realist analysis shows that a perceived lack of reciprocity may lessen the chances of an *empirical* discussion of certain issues. On the other hand, deliberately *not* leaving issues

undiscussed may, at least in Group B, *actually* have furthered reciprocity and have stimulated a student to share a very personal account. The discussion of this student's *empirical* and *actual* situation, enabled by a degree of reciprocity and supportiveness (Alexander 2006), appeared to have led to a *real* understanding for a number of others.

### ***How purposeful were the dialogues?***

Following Group A's day, I made two changes to the format of the following days, in order to make the dialogues more *purposeful* (Alexander 2006, 28), both of which were described in the previous sections: I drew out the issue of the dog in Dialogue 1, and presented Groups B, C and D with a question instead of having this generated by the group, in Dialogue 2

An overall measure of the degree to which dialogues had been purposeful was the fact that, on average, 46% of students indicated in their evaluations that dialogue (or 'discussions') had shaped their views during the day, as is shown in Table 1.

*Table 1 here please.*

As is clear from Table 1, the impact of dialogue was mentioned by a greater number of student teachers than that of any other aspect. Although it cannot be ascertained from the data that student views had been shaped in accordance to my aims, it can be concluded that overall the students perceived the dialogues as purposeful. However, it can also be pointed out that two of the three groups which I had presented with a question (groups C and D), rated the impact of dialogue less highly than the first two groups.

A number of students mentioned in their Reflective Diaries that the *diversity* of opinions expressed was a particularly strong feature of the dialogic enquiries:

The most interesting thing in this session was the range of opinions around the room with regard to economic inequality. The opinions of some students about people on benefits was astounding to me, and was useful to think about as there may well be people with the same opinions in schools I work whether they are overtly expressed or not

(DP, female student Group B, Reflective Diary entry)

Although I had not identified the development of understanding of the range of opinions on this issue as an aim of my teaching, students such as DP (above) clearly appreciated the opportunities that dialogue had provided them with to get an understanding of this.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate to what extent dialogic enquiry, and in particular the liberal practice of the Community of Enquiry, with its focus on questions generated and chosen by the participants, its facilitator neutrality, and its emphasis on reciprocity might be compatible with critical teaching for social justice. As I explained in the previous section in relation to Dialogue 2, I had deemed the discussion of enquiry questions which had been chosen by the participants as insufficiently purposeful (Alexander 2006, 28). Although this would have heightened the students' ownership of the enquiries (Haynes 2002), I felt it was necessary to avoid discussions which were not directly related to my aims, within the limited time available. However, this may have been a factor in the lower evaluations in the last two groups, and in Group D the question presented appeared not to have led to an entirely successful dialogue. It could thus be argued that the enquiry question needs to be chosen *with* rather than *by* or *for* the participants: it needs to be in line with the social justice ITE aims, but it also needs to be relevant to the needs and interests of the participants.

As described in the section on facilitator neutrality, I aimed, as Community of Enquiry advocate Gregory (2014, 637) suggests, to regulate the procedure by asking critical questions and supporting students to identify inferences, evidence and assumptions, and eliciting counter arguments. Gregory argues that, when this is carried out consistently and in great depth, it leads to a *true* (Sayer 2000) understanding of the topic. However, limited amounts of time available, group dynamics and limits to my facilitation prowess produced *empirical* and *actual* dialogues which regularly fell short of this ideal: ‘things could go in many different ways’ (Sayer 2000, 15).

There is a reason, however, why Gregory’s procedurally directive dialogue is, in itself, less than ideal for critical and critical realist teacher educators. He points out that in his method there should be ‘neither overt endorsement of a favoured position nor guidance for the students to accept one’. However, educating teachers in an unequal education system within an unequal society is, as Apple (2013) has said, not value-free. According to Bakhtin (1986, 93), everything that is expressed in dialogue relates to other utterances and must be seen within its wider cultural dialogic context. In discussing poverty therefore, all comments should be seen in relation to currently prevailing ‘underclass’ discourses (Gorski 2012; Jones 2012; Smyth & Wrigley 2014). Not only are such discourses of stigmatisation (Smyth and Wrigley 2014) extremely harmful in education (Gorski 2012), but they also tend to focus on *empirical*, rather than *real* (Sayer 2000) features of inequality. Neutrality is thus not an ideal to aspire to in this context, as critical educators are led by a moral imperative to question and disrupt stigmatising discourses and to discuss the *real*-domain disenfranchisements of the poor (Gorski 2012, 314). It follows that in this context, Burbules’ notion of Dialogue as Instruction would be more appropriate than Dialogue as Inquiry (1993), and Alexander’s notion that dialogues should have *purpose* conflicts with, and overrides, that of dialogues

being *collective* (2006, 28). It became clear during the study that by being overly concerned about being perceived as neutral, I could, paradoxically, obstruct more open discussions, in which a deeper level of *reality* (Sayer 2000) was able to be discussed: the most productive dialogues were those in which *empirical* issues were used as a starting point to explicitly bring out students' *actual* views, but where a multitude of *real* reasons and consequences could also be discussed, and some identified as 'false' (ibid.). From a critical teacher education viewpoint, educators must thus create opportunities for specific 'false' opinions and misunderstandings to be expressed, identified and interrogated (Sayer 2000, 18). In this, they can draw on the expertise of participants in the group to create opportunities for counter arguments to be posed, and for *real* explanations to be explored (Sayer 2000): some views in the dialogue will thus be favoured over others.

However, it is important to protect reciprocity, as this was identified as a crucial element of successful dialogue in this study. A solution is to make it clear to student teachers that opinions are discussed rather than the persons expressing them. Sayer argues in this respect that:

The principle of equality applies to the moral worth of persons, not to the epistemological status of their empirical beliefs: although we might properly regard sociologists and chemists as equals as people, a sociologist's knowledge of chemistry is not equal to that of a chemist [...]. Thus social and moral equality does not entail epistemological equality.

(Sayer 2000, 48)

Although it must be acknowledged that concepts held by critical realist teacher educators are fallible too (Bakhtin 1986, 93; Sayer 2000, 60), it is thus crucial that the actions of facilitators are led by their aims. With critical teacher educators, these are to guard the overriding commitment towards educational equity and the wellbeing of disadvantaged pupils, and to

guide dialogic processes in order to help student teachers understand the *real* connections between phenomena related to this topic.

A day's teaching on the topic of socio-economic disadvantage is of course extremely limited, and it could well be argued that more time should be allocated to this in ITE programmes such as that discussed in this article. However, in a context in which ITE is being moved increasingly to School-led provision, we also need to ask what spaces will remain for dialogue when ITE is primarily carried out in schools, where the main focus must be on the development of pupils. Higher Education institutions are, intrinsically, best resourced to explore and explain issues in the domain of the *real*. As ITE is moved away from Higher Education, we must thus not only ask what the spaces are for genuine dialogue, but also what opportunities there will be for student teachers to access the domain of the *real* in order to understand and explain the issues they will meet in their *empirical* and *actual* practice. Without this there is a serious risk that many student teachers will notice impacts of inequality and disadvantage on their pupils, without the ability to understand these structurally. Importantly, they will thus also lack an awareness of their own role in these processes which perpetuate inequality.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This was a small-scale case study (Thomas 2007), based largely on my own observations and reflections as a practitioner researcher (Stenhouse 1981; Lofthouse et al. 2012). Although this has enabled me to gain a deep understanding of the data, implications drawn from it must be cautious. A greater degree of generalisability could be achieved in further studies of this kind in other contexts, or in larger-scale studies.

Nonetheless, the findings from this study indicate that dialogic enquiry, alongside other pedagogical interventions, has an important role to play within the teaching of social justice in relation to socio-economic disadvantage within ITE.

A number of conclusions and recommendations for further practice can be made on the basis of this study. To begin, I have suggested three aims for social justice ITE in relation to socio-economic disadvantage: these would be firstly to increase understanding of the difficulties faced by pupils living in poverty whilst avoiding the use of deficit discourses in portraying underprivileged families; secondly to develop student teachers' knowledge of the reasons for any educational underachievement of disadvantaged pupils and the ways in which teachers can minimise or exacerbate this; and thirdly to develop an understanding of the structural nature of poverty and the limited powers of education to compensate for it.

I have argued that, whilst reciprocity is an important aspect of effective dialogue, these aims of social justice education should be prioritised over facilitator neutrality and epistemological equality between participants. Where dialogue is based on enquiry questions, these have to be both related to the aims of social justice, and relevant to the participants in order to lead to successful dialogue.

The study has shown that it can be very useful to draw on *empirically* shared experiences, such as film fragments, or students' *actual* experiences as a focus for dialogic enquiry. However, it is only by leading the enquiry into the domain of the *real* that mechanisms can be uncovered which can *explain* the *empirical* and the *actual*. Critical teacher educators should thus be prepared to question social, philosophical, economical and historical aspects of the contributions made, whilst switching between the *empirical*, the *actual* and the *real* (Sayer 2000), and have an awareness of the tensions and complexities (Apple 2013; 62) involved in



this work. As in any other form of pedagogy, subject knowledge and expertise in the facilitation of dialogue is thus crucial.

Finally, I have suggested that the teaching of social justice should play a greater role ITE, but also that Higher Education providers must continue to provide dialogue and *real*-domain depth and criticality in ITE to help student teachers make sense of the inequalities they will experience within their practice.

In a wider theoretical sense, this study has shown that critical realism provides an effective theoretical framework for understanding dialogic enquiry in the teaching of contentious and politically sensitive subjects.

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	% of Group A	% of Group B	% of Group C	% of Group D	Average % for cohort
Dialogue	55	60	35	35	46
'Poor Kids' video	23	20	25	45	28
Creating a poster	5	0	0	0	1
Opinion triangle	14	5	25	5	12

Pre-session reading	18	20	15	5	15
Research findings	5	10	35	10	15
Reflection	5	10	5	5	6

Table 1

Aspects of the day which were mentioned by student teachers  
in their Reflective Diaries as having shaped their views